

2005 Plants of the Year

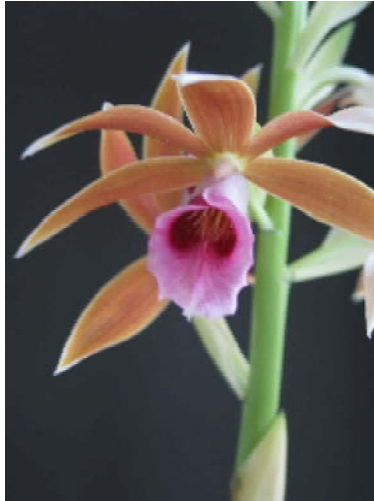


Photo provided by Marie Harrison, UF-IFAS Okaloosa County Extension: Nun's orchid is a beautiful and easy terrestrial orchid to grow in our area.

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One of the hardest things about gardening for many people is knowing which plants to choose. I see shoppers strolling through garden centers with totally confused expressions on their faces. “Do you think this will grow in my yard?” they ask each other. “Will this just be more wasted money?” They are looking for plants that will look good over a long season and that won’t succumb to summer heat or get eaten up by pests. They want plants that will perform in their gardens with reasonable care.

Now Florida residents have an excellent resource that will help them make good choices.

The Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association (FNGLA) has done part of our homework for us. The FNGLA is a group of growers, horticulturists, retailers, landscape professionals, and University of Florida faculty. Each year they select a group of plants and name them “Florida Plants of the Year.”

In order to be considered, plants must have good pest resistance, be reasonably easy to care for, and fairly easy to propagate and grow. Each one must exhibit some superior quality, improved performance, or unique characteristic that sets it apart from others in its class.

After these plants are selected, they are made widely available to the gardening public and are offered at most garden centers. Gardeners benefit by learning about superior plants they might not have considered purchasing before. The 2005 Plants of the Year have been chosen, and they will be available this spring in area nurseries.

Weeping Yaupon Holly (*Ilex vomitoria* ‘Pendula’) is one selection. Growing into a multi-trunked tree 20-30 feet tall by 10-15 feet wide, it makes a striking accent plant. It features small white flowers in spring and red berries in fall and winter. Drooping branches give a narrow profile and distinctive appearance to this evergreen

tree. Expect this Florida native to be disease- and insect-free in full sun or shade and to attract wildlife. Hardiness rating from Zones 7-9 puts our Zone 8 gardens squarely in the center of its range.

If you need a low mounding shrub for a splash of color in a low border, consider golden dewdrop (*Duranta erecta* 'Gold Mound'). Growing 22-24 inches tall by 30 inches wide, this dwarf shrub will keep its color best in full sun in gardens from Zones 8-11. Expect it to get killed back to the ground in winter, and to re-emerge the following spring.

A large flowering shrub that grows 5-10 feet tall by 4-6 feet wide is yellow elder (*Tecoma stans*). This plant blooms almost constantly during warm weather and attracts hummingbirds. The cultivar 'Gold Star' has been a reliable, free-flowering small shrub with masses of golden-yellow flowers over the season. This plant will die to the ground in winter in our area but can be expected to reappear in spring.

Princess flower (*Tibouchina urvilleana*) (Zones 8b-11) is perennial over most of our area. Growing 5-8 feet tall and wide, this flowering shrub spends most of the summer growing to blooming size in North Florida. During the growing season, attractive, silver-green foliage decorates the border. In late summer and fall, attractive, 5-petaled flowers 3-4 inches wide add a touch of royal purple to the garden.

'Mona Lavender' *Plectranthus* offers gardeners a compact, everblooming plant with purple-backed leaves and hundreds of short stalks of lavender flowers throughout the summer. This plant is perennial in tropical areas, but we in North Florida must treat it as an annual. Plant it in masses, and allow for each plant to grow about two feet tall and wide.

Surprisingly, the beautiful Nun's orchid (*Phaius tankervilleae*) is included on the list. I have grown this beautiful orchid for years, but it has been kept in a container and moved to protected areas in the winter. FNGLA information suggests that it is hardy in Zones 8-11, which certainly includes us. Sword-shaped leaves provide a beautiful backdrop for the tall flowers of white, rose, and brown. Of course, the Nun's orchid will go dormant during the winter in our area. Since I have two of these beauties, I intend to plant one outside this spring and test its hardiness for myself.

People looking for a new houseplant might give *Anthurium* 'Sarah' a try. It is recommended for the interior in shade or filtered light. Large pink flowers with contrasting green ears are attention grabbing. It, too, is one that I will have to test for hardiness. FNGLA recommends it for zones 8-11. Reportedly, it grows 46" high and wide.

Look for these plants in garden centers and retail stores this spring. Try them out in your garden. They have been recommended by the experts.

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